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Islamism and ignorance

How denial of Islamist ideology promotes terror

Muslims can't just claim "it's not our fault", given the fast spread of extremism, Muslim radicalisation and anti-Muslim bigotry.

Of course, it's not as simple as that. The causes of extremism are complex and the solutions need to be equally sophisticated if we are to have any hope of returning to moderation. But just denying that a crisis exists instantly aborts the process of problem-solving. This in turn drives the vicious cycle of extremism, vulnerability, antagonism, and bigotry.

Outrage seems to erupt every time an attempt is made to initiate meaningful conversation in this sphere. This highlights just how acutely much of Western society has fallen into the habit of covering up and side-lining critical information, in the name of being politically correct. This section of society, which I have labelled as the "Regressive Left", denies there is a problem. It also encourages others to do the same, while threatening to label those who oppose this blinkered vision as "Islamophobic."

Nothing underlines this better than the fact that I – a Muslim who founded Quilliam, the world's first counter-extremism organisation – have been labelled as an "anti-Muslim extremist" by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, an institution known for advocating for civil rights. Simply because I dare to say that followers of Islam should stand against the perversion of their faith. In an increasingly unstable world, where pressing problems require urgent solutions, this mindless suppression of discussion will only exacerbate the crisis.

Separating 'Islamic' from 'Islamist'

The problem first arises when people refuse to take the time to properly understand an issue and instead choose to jump to conclusions and labels. For example, Muslims often perceive the scrutiny of Islamist ideology as a personal attack on their faith. In reality, this is far from the truth. "Islamist" is very different from "Islamic" which is a value judgement. "Islamic" means that something is endorsed by Islam, whereas "Islamism"

is a political ideology that seeks to impose any version of Islam over society.

In other words, Islamism is a form of theocracy, and its violent manifestation is the global jihadist insurgency. If we cannot talk about a problem with an accurate and correct lexicon, we fail in the very first step to addressing the ideological challenge that lies ahead of us. As long as any criticism of Islam or Muslims remains beyond the sphere of acceptable public dialogue, we will be unable to isolate extremists from mainstream Muslim communities.

What happens if we don't name the Islamist ideology and distinguish it from Islam? US President Barack Obama's 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly referred to adherents of ISIS as followers of a "poisonous ideology," yet he failed to name it.

The first problem here is that the ideology is given undue weight and larger-than-life importance. That's because hysteria is increased around the ideology, alongside a refusal to spell out what it entails. I call this the 'Voldemort effect', after the evil Harry Potter character.

Secondly, when you refuse to elaborate, you allow room for your audience to fill in the gaps themselves. Most people, who are understandably looking for guidance on such topics, may well assume that the ideology they must challenge is Islam and all Muslims, hence the rise of xenophobic trends in Europe and the US and other Western countries.

The dangers of political correctness

Here's another example of the far-left's inexplicable desire to remove Islam from the public dialogue: the absurd recent trend of encouraging the use of the word "Daesh" instead of "ISIS" to refer to the Islamic State. Liberals often assume that this term is softer to the ears of Muslims, because Daesh does not contain the word Islam. But this is incorrect. "Daesh" is simply the exact Arabic acronym for ISIS – it contains the word Islam, and in Arabic. This goes some way to explaining how the debate is plagued by uninformed nonsense, due to a fear of "offending Islam".

This brings me to the term "Islamophobia", often deployed – even against Muslims like myself – as a shield against any criticism, and as a muzzle on free speech. No idea, no matter how deeply held, should be given special status. For there will always be an equally deeply held belief in opposition to it. Hatred motivated specifically to target Muslims must be

condemned. But to confuse this hatred with satirising, questioning, researching, reforming, contextualising or historicising Islam – or any other faith or dogma – is as good as returning to the Inquisition of the Italian astronomer Galileo in the 16th century.

Freedom of speech, a moral imperative

Our freedom to speak represents our freedom to think, and our freedom to think represents our ability to create, innovate and progress. You cannot kill an idea, but you can certainly kill a person for expressing it. If liberty means anything at all, it is the right to express oneself without being killed for it. So any liberal naturally concerned with a fair society must be the first to openly defend against the erosion of free speech, especially when deceptively done in the name of minority groups.

Meanwhile, our political leaders invariably try to restrict the definition of the problem to whichever jihadist group is causing them the biggest headache at the time. Yet they ignore the fact that these groups are all born of the same Islamist ideology.

Before Islamic State emerged, the US State Department took to naming this problem "al-Qa'ida inspired extremism," even though it was not al-Qa'ida that inspired this extremism. Rather, Islamist extremism inspired al-Qa'ida. Nor was it the Islamic State that radicalised those 6,000 European Muslims who have travelled to join them, or the thousands of home-grown supporters the French and British now say they are monitoring. This cannot have happened overnight and could not have emerged from a vacuum – Islamic State propaganda is good but not that good.

In truth, decades of Islamist propaganda in communities had already primed these young Muslims to yearn for a theocratic caliphate. When surveyed, one in three British Muslims expressed a desire to resurrect a caliphate. Islamic State simply plucked the low-hanging fruit that had been seeded long ago by various Islamist groups.

Any push back will require decades of community resilience. But we cannot even begin to do so until we recognise the problem for what it is. That will require shedding our tendency to appease, obfuscate, double-speak and tiptoe around the problem in the name of political correctness. And whereas our fellow Muslims require our compassion, and Islam is in need of reform today, Islamism must be intellectually terminated. In the long term, this is the only way to clip the wings of this fully blown global jihadist insurgency.



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